FROM VALLEY TO MOUNTAIN AND BACK
LUKE 9:28-43
MALACHI 4:1-6

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The funny thing about heights is that everything looks good from them. One thinks of those spectacular shots of the earth taken from the surface of the moon. Or the view of the landscape from the window of an airplane at 25,000 feet: placid, serene, peaceful, orderly. From the observation area in the John Hancock building the worst Chicago ghettoes appear no differently from the rest of the city: neatly laid out, calm, remote.

Just west of Altoona, Pennsylvania, the city where I was born and raised, in the middle of the mountain range that borders the city, is one particular peak that extends out over the valley a bit. There is a high plateau on top: a radio tower, a good road, a large parking lot - and an incredible view. It's a very popular spot - for reasons that hardly need mentioning. Whenever we're in Altoona I like to go up there. You can see for miles: it's absolutely quiet except for the wind. The city stretches out below ringed with mountain resevoirs. You can see the railroad snaking through the center of the city like a great artery: the dome of the Cathedral of St. John is visible rising above all the rest. At night, it is truly a beautiful sight.

Whenever I think of my home-town, that is the image that comes to my mind: that is how I like to remember it. That placid, peaceful city nestled in the mountains. My view excludes the dirt from the Railroad, the noise unemployment, poverty. There are no slums in my image, no unpleasant people, no unhappiness. That is to say, my mountain top image bears no resemblance to the reality of Altoona, which in fact has all of those characteristics in the same proportion as any other city that size. That is not to say that it is a wrong image to keep, only that it is incomplete, and to the degree that it is all that I remember of Altoona, inaccurate. But, it's still good to go there and look.

So, in life it's good to go to the mountain; to get away from it all, to collect one's thoughts, to see life as a unified whole rather than a series

of disjointed crises. But just as it is tempting for me to remember the city only from the mountain, so you and I are tempted not to come down: to define real life in terms of the high points.....

And so, also, in faith. It's good to go to the mountain where beliefs are crystal clear, where God is immediate and real and love is all around. Sometimes we talk as if that were the norm in faith. But that gets us ahead of ourselves. Let's go back now and look at an incident in the New Testament that has to do with the rhythm of valley to mountain and back.

It occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels: it's called the Transfiguration, and that's a little unfortunate because the transfiguration of Christ is itself a most difficult concept, but more to the point it is only part of what happened in the incident. Three followers of Jesus saw him in a new way through the experience: they were changed: and in the process they were taught a very important lesson about discipleship.

We need to know a little bit about the Old Testament in order to understand this passage. It is literally loaded with words and ideas that have their roots in the faith of Israel.

Jesus took three disciples: Peter, John and James and went up on a mountain. In the idiom of Israel mountains are the residing place of God - the place where God comes to meet man: Mt. Zion - the mountain of God where the Kingdom will first be established: Moses on the Mountain receiving the Law: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills "the Psalmist wrote.

So on the mountain Jesus appeared to the three disciples in an altogether new light. Their vision included two men out of the past, Moses and Elijah.

The final words of the Old Testament invoke their names: "Remember the law of my servant Moses....Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:4-5)

Moses - the law giver: Elijah - the prophet exemplary: there were no higher authorities: in the cult of Israel they occupied the same position

as Washington and Lincoln in our own pantheon of heroes. The point is that when - on a mountain - Moses and Elijah appear - the day of the Lord - the Messianic age - has arrived.

Peter was overwhelmed, as any Jew would be. ("Master, let us make three booths; one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.") That, by the way, is exactly what God had told Moses to do after the encounter on Mt. Sinai. Build a sanctuary - a tabernacle - in which God would reside among his people. ~~During the long years of wandering in the wilderness that tabernacle was carried ahead of the people and assembled at each stopping place by the Levitical priests~~. So, Peter, was not exactly talking out of turn: there was sound historical precedent for his suggestion - with one exception. Moses built his booth - not up on the mountain, but down in the valley among the people. carried ahead during wandering
Peter, that is to say, had his geography confused, and Luke apologizes for him by adding the parenthetical observation: ("He spoke without knowing what he was saying.")

Then a cloud descended over the mountain top: another rich symbol. The cloud - the Shekinah - led the people through the wilderness by day: It was believed popularly (see II Maccabees) that the cloud would return to usher in the Messianic age. And then the voice: "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him!"

Now, some reflections: this account, as part of the Gospel record, was written from thirty to sixty years after the fact. After, that is to say, the Christian Community knew that Jesus was in fact, the Christ. It, along with the rest, was written this side of the resurrection. But at the time, it it is not clear at all, what the disciples believed about Jesus. It appears that they were simply following one they considered to be the best rabbi around. Very slowly, gradually did they entertain any deeper notions about him. But looking back on it, they could remember times when the truth was being made clear to them. The experience on the mountain was one of those times. A simple illustration should suffice. When we were children there were times

when our parents said things to us - or did things for us - the importance of which has only recently become evident. A gift given, for instance, which we received without much thought at the time, but which now - in retrospect - speaks eloquently of love and sacrifice and caring.

The experience on the mountain was like that. Obviously, a high and holy moment for Jesus in terms of his own self-understanding. But also a turning point -as they looked back on it - in the lives of three disciples.

It is Peter's response - his suggestion that three booths be erected - that intrigues me. I have mentioned the historic precedent and the fact that Peter misunderstood the whole idea of the tabernacle. It may have been simply a very natural desire on his part to prolong a most rewarding and significant experience: an understandably human effort to preserve one clear moment in time by building something to memoralize it: a very human want - to stay up there on the mountain and to avoid the necessity of coming back down.

Jesus did not even acknowledge Peter's suggestion. Instead, he came down from the mountain - down to a great crowd that was waiting for him; down to the desperate father of a very sick little boy; down to the ineffective faith of his disciples; down, that is to stay into the reality of life in the valley.

The contrast is striking: it has been dramatically portrayed in the very famous painting by Raphael. More immediately, it has been suggested that in that contrast - the contrast between the transfigured Christ on the Mountain and the compassionate healer in thevvalley of suffering lies the whole story of God and his people.

The Church throughout history has done its best to preserve that which is high and holy - often at the expense of following its Lord into the valley of human need. How else, for instance, to see the great cathedrals of Christendom ? Monuments to craftsmanship, places of soaring grandeur, symbols of beauty and hope without which our civilization would be immeasurably poorer.

But, integrity forces us to admit, that they were built in the midst of grinding poverty and injustice and oppression and cruelty. I love them, but I cannot rid myself of the thought that they are today filled - not with the courageous people of God - but with gawking American tourists - as a result of the honest judgement of an honest and just God.

It is not confined to European Cathedrals. Urban America is full of them. In his book " Naming the Whirl-Wind" Langdon Gilkey compares the situation to the German villages dominated by a castle built high on a rock. In the middle ages the town was governed from there: commerce transpired there: the castle was where the action was. But today, only the tourists go there: the only commerce is in post-cards and souvenirs.. Real life happens down below - almost as if the castle no longer exists. (P.199)

The word here for the contemporary church is almost too clear. Our task, as church, is not to dawdle on the mountain top but to follow our Lord down into the valley. Not to attempt vainly to imprison our God in our buildings, our traditions, our ecclesiastical structures - but to see him always out in front of us, leading, moving forward and down and into the world.

We begin today our participation in the One Great Hour of Sharing: one attempt to translate this understanding into an honest program. So our gifts are used, not to decorate booths on the mountain top but to heal and feed and help.

Because Jesus came down from the mountain, so the significance of this congregation is measured in how effectively we move from ~~this~~ our well appointed sanctuary and into ~~our~~ the valley - ~~through the Lafayette Urban Ministry the Transportation Service Senior Citizens Visitation~~ or any!

The word here is personal also. There is a lot of Peter about us. In fact, one of the predominent ideas in our culture is that the mountain top is the norm - experientially - not the valley. We are encouraged to live from vacation to vacation: or at least from week-end to week-end, simply putting in the time between. The Playboy philosophy proposes that the good life - real

life be lived on the mountaintop of good music, food, clothes, cars, booze and of course beautiful women. And the magazine that has done the best job in American history of marketing an idea - a concept - zealously avoids anything that might even hint that there is a valley out there. There are no children in Playboy, no families, no alcoholics, no junkies, no ghettoes, no broken lives, no guilt, no unemployment: nothing to diminish the idea that real life is always on the mountaintop of pleasure. The toll is heavy in terms of frustration: because life is lived mainly in the valley - at the foot of the mountain.

In terms, finally of our Christian experience, the rhythm of valley to mountain and back is essential. I would guess that there is no one here who does not wish,deep in his heart of hearts, for some clear, concise experience of Jesus Christ. I would guess that nearly everyone of us experiences a little envy - a little feeling of inadequacy when someone tells us that to be saved is to know, absolutely, without doubt, Jesus Christ as savior and friend . I would guess that nearly all of us wonder what it must be like to be on the mountain top of faith, and that we inevitably wonder if we have it at all because our experience doesn't often take us up on that mountain - if ever.

Any if my guesses about you are accurate I would have you understand very cearly what the New Testament is really saying in this incident. The experience of Peter, James and John did not begin on the mountain-top. Rather it started, for them, undramatically, when they decided to follow a Lord whom they did not fully understand or know. It was not - as I read the accounts - a soul-shattering, emotional upheaval. It was, apparently, a tentative step in the direction of following - that led to another step and then to another. ~~And it is at this point that I part ways with the whole gimmick filled idea of mass evangelism~~. Peter, James and John were taken up to the mountain, there to have their faith confirmed intimately, personally, dynamically - after - they had followed Jesus Christ in the valley.

They had worked and served and healed and helped and this glorious moment came to them almost as an interlude, a break from reality which was always in the valley. And when they got so carried away with the intensity of the experience - when they suggested that it might become the norm, Jesus didn't even respond. Or rather his response was in taking them down from the mountain and wading right into a crowd of people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for me at least, said it best: "....there is no road to faith or discipleship, no other road - only obedience to the call of Christ." (The Cost of Discipleship P.49)

And Frederick Buechner, equally honest with the New Testament: "Who is this who asks us to follow? We want to know who he is before we follow him and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is." (The Magnificent Defeat. P.93)

Today you begin your life high-point people. This is a high point - mountain top - For F L + people of this comg.

You and I as church, and as individuals ~~are called to follow Jesus Christ~~ in the valley where life is usually lived. You are called, Rumer, to follow J.C. It need not be, and will not be for most of us, a very spectacular valley. Rather it will look a lot like the school, the family with which you eat dinner every night, the office or factory where you work, the marriage, the committee on which you serve. That is where Jesus Christ bids us to follow and to serve and help and heal. That is where the creative, hopeful spirit of God is.

And then one day we will know. One day we will be invited to the mountain - perhaps only for a fleeting moment: but a rich and clear moment of truth. When it happens, let us pray God that we will have the faith to follow our Lord back down again. ~~From Valley to Mountain and back.~~ AMEN

May God bless you in your community. May it be graced with high + holy moments - may it take into valley - where J.C. proceeds + bids us follow AM

FATHER: we are grateful for those moments in life when we are given to see clearly: those rare moments of truth and light and clarity. But grant us, our father, the faith to follow our Lord in the meantime. AMEN Announce Hymn #389